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AP Language and Composition

Mr. Lane

May 26, 2009

What You Don’t Know about Your Happy Meal

I: Introduction and Context

Two all beef patties, covered with a “special sauce,” topped with crisp green lettuce, juicy pickles, a few onions, and melted American cheese, all on a sesame seed bun, and served with golden fries and an ice-cold drink; this is the typical fast food meal that can be purchased at any of the millions of fast food restuarnts in America, such as McDonald’s, Burger King, Wendy’s, and Arby’s. These are all restaurant chains that every American has heard of, and that the majority of Americans have dined at. However, very few Americans know the immense impact these restaurant chains (and others like them) have had on the American economy. In the book, *Fast Food Nation*, author Eric Schlosser exposes the deadly truth about the numerous ways in which the fast food industry has negatively impacted American society.

II: The Author’s Background

Eric Schlosser is an award-winning journalist, and is currently a correspondent for the *Atlantic Monthly*. His literary work has appeared in *Rolling Stone*, *Vanity Fair*, the *Nation*, and *The New Yorker*. Schlosser’s skills as a reporter and journalist have earned him high praise in a cross section of industries. He has received a National Magazine Award as well as a Sidney Hillman Foundation Award for reporting. Additionally, Schlosser has had the honor of addressing the United States House of Representatives and Senate. Also, he has lectured at universities across the country, including Princeton University, the University of California at Berkeley, Yale University, College of the Holy Cross, and Claremont College. Schlosser has written three books, all of which have been national bestsellers. His most famous work is *Fast Food Nation*, which started as an article in Rolling Stone, has been called “a groundbreaking work of investigation and cultural history that changed the way America thinks about the way it eats” (“Author Biography: Eric Schlosser”). *Fast Food Nation* is now an assigned reading book at universities across the country. Schlosser has immense experience in the literary world, which provides him with credibility and reliability. Also, Schlosser’s invitations to respectable universities and government institutions shows that even well respected, powerful people trust Schlosser’s work; this gives Schlosser immense authority. Additionally, Schlosser’s great success shows his writing is creative, impressionable, and dependable.

III: The Book’s Argument

*Fast Food Nation* displays the numerous ways in which the fast food industry has corrupted American society, and Schlosser’s rhetorically persuasive tactics make his examples convincing and credible. Schlosser uses appeals to pathos, logos, and ethos to establish support for his claims.

Most of the novel’s persuasive tactics come from appeals to pathos. The novel discusses how fast food restaurants aim their advertising at children. The fast food restaurants know that children are very vulnerable, and they hope to leave a lasting impression in the minds of those young kids. Restaurants create kid-friendly environments by having cheerful mascots (such as Ronald McDonald) and entertaining “playlands” (Schlosser 23). People think of children as precious blessings who are innocent and naïve. That is why Schlosser’s depiction of how children’s minds are corrupted by fast food advertisements evokes such strong emotions. These descriptions make the reader sympathize with the poor children and look at the fast food companies with disgust.

Another appeal to pathos is presented in the discussion about the poor treatment of the fast food employees. Fast food restaurants do not need experienced or skilled workers. All they need is a few people to take orders, operate machines, and do simple tasks. So, the fast food businesses seek people who are unskilled and will work for low pay. The current fast food workforce is comprised of mostly teen-agers, the elderly, the disabled, and immigrants. Schlosser interviewed numerous fast food employees and almost all of them expressed negative comments about their jobs. Many employees admitted to working twelve-hour shifts, not receiving their fully earned wages, and being disrespected and spoken to in a derogatory manner (Schlosser 73). Also, everyone Schlosser interviewed was a struggling employee—either a poor teenager from a broken family, an immigrant who barely speaks English, or a mentally handicapped individual. Reading about how these individuals’ jobs add unnecessary challenges and struggles in their lives is heartbreaking. Schlosser definitely knows how to evoke piteous emotions out of the reader.

In addition to appeals to pathos, Schlosser uses numerous logistical appeals to show how immensely the fast food industry has impacted the U.S. economy. Schlosser argues that over the last three decades, fast food has infiltrated every “nook and cranny” of American society. Schlosser then supports this claim by stating that in 2000, Americans spent more than $110 billion on fast food. Americans now spend more money on fast food than on movies, books, magazines, videos, and recorded music—combined (Schlosser 3). This statistic is astonishing and almost unbelievable. Schlosser uses this appeal to logos in the beginning of the novel to astound the reader and grasp his/her attention. This statistic certainly convinces the reader that fast food is a huge part of Americans’ lives.

Finally, Schlosser’s most persuasive technique is his appeal to ethos, which comes at the very end of the novel. The last section of the book is titled “Notes.” In this section, Schlosser credits every person, business, website, and book from which he retrieved information. Every piece of evidence is cited and explained. The sources include reliable government groups (such as the U.S. Commerce Department), credible organizations (such as the National Restaurant Association), and famous fast food pioneers (such as Ray Kroc, inventor of Ronald McDonald and franchisor of McDonalds) (Schlosser 278-329). These extensive notes build credibility and reliability in the information presented in the novel. These notes show that Schlosser’s evidence is not false and can be used to form an educated opinion of the fast food industry.

The only real weakness in Schlosser’s novel is the text’s organization. The book quickly jumps from one topic to another, and although the different topic sections are labeled, parts of the book are difficult to follow. If the information was more neatly organized, and the topics transitioned into each other more smoothly, the book would present its information in more straightforward way, making it easier for the reader.

IV: Opposing Viewpoints

When this book was first published, many fast food chain owners were outraged. The companies argued that Schlosser’s arguments were biased, unreliable, and false. Mark Klein, the communications director for Cargill Inc. (one of the nation’s leading food marketers) stated, "I don't fully understand how Schlosser can say some of these things when there are numbers out there that prove differently" (Jayne). Klein challenged Schlosser’s claim that employees in the food industry are paid low wages by stating that the starting salary for employees at Cargill Inc. is $10.33, a wage that he does not consider low (Jayne). I do agree that a wage of $10.33 is fairly high for a part-time job; this wage is almost $3 above minimum wage. However, the starting salary of an employee at Cargill Inc. is completely than the salary paid to fast food employees. The two jobs are very different and are in different areas of the food industry. Additionally, all of Schlosser’s information is cited at the end of the novel, so unless his resources provided false information, all of Schlosser’s evidence is reliable. Klein’s counterargument to Schlosser’s claim is weak and does not disprove Schlosser’s statement.

Additional opposition to *Fast Food Nation* comes from the website “Best Food Nation.” This website was formed by numerous members of the food industry who were angered by Schlosser’s book. The site tries to disprove Schlosser’s arguments by showing the many ways in which the fast food industry actually helps the U.S. economy. “Best Food Nation” claims that America’s restaurants “build careers, serve customers, and provide choice.” It states that restaurants are one of America’s largest private sector employers, providing more than 12.8 million jobs to people, most who are untrained, inexperienced, or disabled. It also asserts that these jobs are provided to people who are unable to find work anywhere else (Best Food Nation). It is true that a lot of the employees at fast food restaurants would not be able to find work in other industries. However, this does not contradict or justify fast food employees being treated poorly and disrespected.

Additionally, the website argues that the restaurant industry actually enhances the U.S. economy, stating that restaurant sales currently account for four percent of the U.S. GDP. Also, the site claims that statistics show that every dollar spent dining out generates $2.34 in business for other industries (Best Food Nation). Although the fast food restaurant industry may contribute to the United States’ financial success, the negative impacts on the economy outweigh the benefits. For example, America’s obesity epidemic, partly caused by the fast food industry, is a much larger issue than a few percent increase in the nation’s GDP. The claims on this website are clearly biased and do not show evidence to disprove any of the assertions made by Schlosser.

V: Conclusion

*Fast Food Nation* employs numerous rhetorical persuasion strategies to exposes many hidden truths about the fast food industry. Through appeals to pathos, the book shows how fast food advertising is aimed at the impressionable minds of children, causing kids to behave poorly and eat badly. Additional appeals to pathos are used to show how fast food chains seek unskilled workers to work long shifts, receive little pay, and get even less respect. Finally, Schlosser uses appeals to logos to address how the fast food industry is continually growing and is beginning to take over American society. Schlosser backs up all his information with numerous appeals to ethos in the end notes of the novel. Mainly, this book provides persuasive techniques to prove that the only concern of the fast food restaurant owners is making a large profit. This book convinced me that fast food chain owners are not bothered by how their restaurants impact children, their employees, or the entire U.S. economy; their goal is to make money, and they don’t care who they hurt in the process. Clearly, the fast food industry has a hidden dark side that negatively impacts American society.

Works Cited

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**Writing Scorecard**

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